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RENÉ TATON, 1915–2004



The world's community of historians of science has but a small number of founding fathers. One of them was René Taton, who left us on 9 August 2004, while on holiday in Ajaccio, the capital of his beloved Corsica. Most of us will know him, I presume, as one of the first editors-in-chief—together with Suzanne Delorme—of the *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences* or, perhaps more likely, as the director of the four-volume *Histoire générale des sciences*, duly translated into English. At least some of us will remember him, more personally, as the director of the celebrated Centre Alexandre Koyré of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, in the rue Colbert, Paris. I count myself among the privileged few who were allowed to pass the Ph.D. under his supervision.

René Taton was a dedicated mathematician before specializing in the history of science. In 1951, in the aftermath of World War II, he passed the *doctorat d'état ès lettres* under Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), with an analysis of the works of Gaspard Monge (primary thesis) and Girard Desargues (accessory thesis) in the field of projective geometry. Apart from Bachelard, there were also Pierre Sergescu (1893–1954), George Sarton (1884–1956), and, from 1954 onward, and of course most prominently in hindsight, Alexandre Koyré. The author of the epoch-making *Etudes galiléennes* (1940) had switched that year from the more philosophically and religiously minded Fifth Section to the new Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris, to teach the history of scientific ideas.¹ In 1958

Koyré launched the Centre de Recherches en Histoire des Sciences et des Techniques (CRHST), most appropriately located in the hôtel de Nevers, 12, rue Colbert, where in the early eighteenth century the Marquess Anne Thérèse de Lambert, as lady of the house, used to receive the intelligentsia of her time. Since he had been elected in the meantime to the Institute of Advanced Study of Princeton University, Koyré regularly left René Taton in charge of the new center. With his colleague and friend Father Pierre Costabel, Taton was nominated *directeur adjoint* in 1958 to ensure institutional continuity during Koyré's yearly absences. The latter's death, in April 1964, was a serious blow for the well-established Franco-American collaboration. Taton succeeded Koyré as the director of the CRHST and rebaptized it in 1966 in order to perpetuate the name of its founder. In the complicated but marvelously flexible French system of higher education—with its Grandes Ecoles superimposed on the classical universities, its various high-level foundations of private origin such as the Centre International de Synthèse, and, of course, the newly founded CNRS—the Centre Alexandre Koyré rapidly came to the fore through some fascinating initiatives that had an international allure. The most imaginative was perhaps the backing, under the aegis of the CNRS, of the edition of the *Correspondance du P. Marin Mersenne*, an enterprise that was well under way but badly needed an institutional environment of sufficiently authoritative status. With Cornelis de Waard, Robert Lenoble, Bernard Rochot, and Armand Beaulieu, successively, as general editor, collaborators from all over the world—myself included—were kindly invited to participate (to search for documents, verify facts, produce translations of all kinds, etc.). In much the same vein, though more in the French context, the great collective work *Histoire générale des sciences* was started up: specialists from the different sciences were asked to submit chapters on their subject, Taton generously overseeing the style and consistency of the whole as well as contributing crucial parts. The result was an invaluable treasure of interdisciplinary insights, much in the spirit of the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert, a panorama that was to suggest thrilling ideas both to students and experienced scientists while at the

¹ The Sixth Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes became independent in 1975 as the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

same time being informative for retired professionals. It was translated into English, as already noted, and also into Arabic, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish; together with the three successive French editions, these translations illustrate the truly worldwide impact of what was to become the Taton school. In this context it was more or less self-evident that, on the international scene, the editions of the correspondence of Leonhard Euler and of the Bernoulli family would be wholeheartedly supported by Taton and his numerous Ph.D. students, while *thésards* from the Sorbonne and *chercheurs associés* of the Centre Alexandre Koyré were kindly allowed to partake. With regard to Euler, for instance, Taton collaborated with the late Adolf Juschkevitch in editing Euler's *Commercium epistolicum* with Clairaut, d'Alembert, and Lagrange. In France, Taton was editor-in-chief of Volumes 2 (1958) and 15 (1974) of the collected works (second series) of Augustin Cauchy and organized several commemorative congresses (of Roemer in 1976 and of Huygens in 1979). It was therefore quite natural that the edition of Lavoisier's correspondence was entrusted to Taton's team, a group that combined a keen historical overview with thorough scientific know-how as to the chemical and economic details. As a spin-off of these exciting long-term challenges, the Centre Alexandre Koyré became the perfect complement to Paris's unrivaled libraries, the *pied à terre* for established historians of science from all over the world as well as the *école* for the studious young men and women of the new generation. Representatives of both categories were warmly received by Myriana Ilic, the head, and her staff.

René Taton naturally became involved in the international organizations of our profession. After World War II the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences, Aldo Mieli's great Paris-based creation, got a fresh start, though its traditional structure did not fit in with the plans of the brand new UNESCO. Under the aegis of the International Council of Scientific Unions a new organization was set up, an organization that would unite and represent national history of science societies. In 1956 both the historians and the philosophers of science were induced—a bit *à contre cœur* from both sides, it is true—to constitute the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science, albeit in two divisions. Taton became the first secretary general of the Division of History of Science; later he served successively as vice president (1972–1975) and president (1975–1978). The CRHST was, from its very beginning, the statutory seat of the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences;

somewhat later, the Division of History of Science of the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science also settled there.

At the Ph.D.-level *séminaire* at the Centre Koyré, newly published books were presented by Taton—and often by their authors—and subsequently discussed. The students themselves were invited to read successive parts of their theses, while visiting scholars, working, for example, around the corner at the Bibliothèque Nationale, informed the audience about the state of their research. Distinguished speakers were allowed to present their talks on the second floor, in the former *salon* of Madame de Lambert—the audience, in wintertime, usually retaining shawls and coats. As part of the scientific conviviality, visitors and students were accustomed to sending reprints of their articles and, eventually, copies of their books, often with a dedication to the CRHST. Now, about fifty years later, the archives and the library of the Centre Koyré testify by their richness to that atmosphere of engaging hospitality, where a mild touch of humor was always at hand to save situations, if not complete careers. Indeed, anyone interested in the history of science was encouraged to participate in the various collaborative activities of the center, activities that stretched, almost on principle, from antiquity to late twentieth-century science and covered, on much the same principle, not only the Old and the New Continent but, in fact, the whole world. Long before the word “globalization” existed, it was daily practice at 12, rue Colbert—French, almost by accident, being the indispensable current language. It was natural, therefore, that the *habitué* was expected to be as rigorously French as possible.

After his retirement, in 1983, Taton continued to partake regularly in the quadrennial IUHPS-DHS congresses and associated international conferences—as, for instance, that celebrating the tercentenary of Christiaan Huygens in 1995. There is therefore more than justice alone in his being awarded, by the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences, the most distinguished honor in our profession, the golden medal bearing the name of his great predecessor and example, Alexandre Koyré, in 1997.

From the second half of the 1960s the Centre Alexandre Koyré became involved in what is doubtless the boldest and most ambitious enterprise in the history of science to date, an undertaking initiated under the auspices of the American Council of Learned Societies and entrusted to Charles Coulston Gillispie. I mean, of course, that breathtaking monument of scholarship, the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, that Gillispie

brilliantly brought to completion early in the 1980s. The global character of this enterprise, with regard to the participating authors, was undisputed; the French contribution, through the efforts of Taton, counts among the most impressive. With that particular touch of humor that is his hallmark, Gillispie in a way took the place that had been left open by Koyré. It was quite logical, then, to see him—for example, in 1981–1982—as a visiting professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, lecturing on his creation and its history. In the event, Charles Gillispie became one of the leading *connoisseurs* of French science in all its aspects.

Perhaps I may end with a more personal memory. I once was invited for lunch, rue Gay-Lussac, and Pierre Costabel, his priestly outfit full of chalk dust, happened to be there. Under the benign eye of Juliette Taton, herself a translator

of Italian works (e.g., of Vasco Ronchi's *Histoire de la lumière* [1956]), the host and his senior guest discussed all kinds of interesting things—and I just shut up and listened. These great men clearly enjoyed each other's company and were happy to contribute, each in his own way, to the flourishing of the Centre Koyré. Religion and philosophy were perhaps omnipresent, but never the subject of discussion. Though I was invited to say something from time to time, in order to perfect my French, the grateful listener in me, and of course the historian of science, made more progress.

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